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Letter from George Downing to Governor Smith

George Downing was a prominent restaurant and hotel owner in Newport. From 1865 until 1877, he also ran the Members' Dining Room at the US House of Representatives in Washington, DC. His proximity to lawmakers helped him advance civil rights issues both in Washington and in Rhode Island. Read the back of the letter (verso) to see how the government responded to Downing's request.

New Port Sept 17, 1863

Gov. J.Y. Smith, Honorable Sir

I observe by a commission which I have the honor to hold from your hands, that a company over which I have been elected captain, is designated as a colored company. This may to you seem a non important thing, but I regard it otherwise; as involving a principle. The law under which the company was organized like our noble Constitution knows no such designating title as that of color and as the designation has been used in so many instances to degrade and to scoff, and as I would have it used only where imperatively necessary, I ask it as a favor that you designate the company by some title (if necessary) I care not what, so it shall not make us especially a mark. I would like to have my commission altered to this effect, and that the record should be alike honorable and clear.

I remain with profound respect your [obedient servant],
Geo T Downing

VERSO

Center panel:

State of R. Island
Executive Department
Prov. Sept. 18th, 1863

Respectfully referred to the Judge Advocate General with the request that he immediately inform his excellency whether there is anything in the law requiring said Company to be designated as a Colored Co.

By Order
Charles E. Bailey
Colonel

To be returned

Left panel:

Returned and opinion favorable.

Gen. Maura directs to issue regular commission omitting word Colored

Charles E. Bailey
Colonel

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, Petitions Received, 1725-1890, C#00165.